JEROME LIEBLING

cover: No. 35. *Used Clothing Factory, New York City*

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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

No. 23. from *Handball* series, Miami Beach

Jerome Liebling has worked for decades in the American photographic tradition which combines, or alternates between, photojournalism and a more formal sort of "social realism." Liebling has, however, always projected qualities of subtlety and ambivalence which separate him decisively from many of the associations those terms ordinarily suggest. Liebling occasionally does give us raw or brutal and certainly often monolithic images, and it is sometimes these we remember, but in fact more often his photographs are complex, delicate, somehow mitigated and attenuated by thought rather than primarily informed by direct feeling. This is not to say that he is a cold artist: he is a *sensuous* one—not at all, as some might have inferred, an ideologue.

Liebling has tended to work in series or groups of images—in recapitulating his production antecedent to the recent color prints, we think of various thematic bodies of work. There are the journalistic photographs of American political figures, the slaughterhouse images, neighborhood life in the Bronx, the cadavers, the pictures of Spain, the men playing handball. Liebling has been characterized as a shocking or a "coercive" image-maker[1], and cast in the mold of Hassidic moralist, literal commentator either on suffering and sad heroism, or romantic transcendence. But now he has decided to work exclusively in the recently validated esthetic realm of color photography, and we see that the truth about him as an artist may be something other than what we suspected even in his most lighthearted and lyric black and white photographs.

The American photographers who created the tradition of great social-documentary work have found more than enough latitude in black and white images. Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, W. Eugene Smith, Weegee, have created several powerful episodes in the broad configuration of this mode. Liebling owes something to them all but he is at least as close to the more formally self-conscious photographers Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, Henri Cartier-Bresson, A.C. Vroman, Paul Strand, or August Sander. But apart from any of these precedents or affinities, Liebling's own nature asserts itself clearly; as it happens it is not primarily an esthetic of "social consciousness," but predominantly a voice which is *sensuous* and even "culturally reflexive." Like Hine or Lange, Liebling communicates a kind of dispassionate curiosity about the world, in his case often the world of the Eastern European Jew in America. But he shares with the opposite impulses of Strand or Vroman a deep grasp of the efficacy of artistic ordering in the task of mediating human values. The realm of the formal or the esthetic in Liebling's black and white photographs is often perfectly balanced against the realm of the narrative or ethical. This balance is struck for instance in the series of men playing handball, which Estelle Jussim called "his most consistently noble achievement."[2]

The present exhibition presents a distilled review of the various black and white series from 1962 to 1979, but concentrates more intensively on the color photographs of the last two years. Though still created in groups, the new color photographs embody a much greater fluidity, a ranging not only among various geographic locations but among various genres. Liebling had rarely, for instance, concentrated on still life before he took up color work. He continues to explore his familiar framing devices—the centered object, using either centrifugal or centripetal symmetry; the stacked or leaved composition; figures arranged as though in dance; airless density of composition—but he adds to these. What is astonishing is his present range of command, given the enormity of the added factor of palette. Liebling demonstrates several approaches; some of the color photographs, such as catalogue numbers 35 and 39, seem pigmented, frontally lit. Others, notably catalogue numbers 52 and 32, are illumined it seems from within, from behind. The photographer does in fact often use a strobe, but this is not quite what makes this distinction between spectral (internally glowing) as opposed to pigmented (front-lit) color.

It is still an unexplained phenomenon that before about 1970 the great humanist photographers have virtually unanimously renounced the use of color as a valid esthetic medium. The exceptions are few. Evans made slight forays into color work, never truly mastering its potential; Alvarez Bravo and Lartigue are only slightly more comfortable than Evans in this medium. Liebling is preceded in the transition by his friend Helen Levitt,

and his color work requires comparison with hers. Like Levitt, Liebling approaches the new range of effect implicit in color not as a painter concerned with chromatic juxtapositions and balances for their own sake; instead he presses color into the service of narrative and psychic nuance, using "color" in the literary sense. Liebling seems instinctively to understand the correct range of palette—warm or cold hues, dark or light, saturated or pastel, etc.—in relation to his choice of tenor or ethical point. But he never lapses into the effete or "purely delectative" mode that threatens so much recent color photography; the overriding content of the color photographs remains with the subject depicted, not with chromatic values on an abstractly pleasing level. Precisely how this works is a mystery, as are so many of photography's elements. Still it is emphatically true (we see this immediately) that Liebling's color photographs are more like his own black and white photographs than they are like the color photographs of any other photographer.

In some of Liebling's most dramatic black and white photographs, particularly the series of cadavers and abattoirs, the element of *texture*, of surface facture and tonal richness, is so overwhelmingly elaborate and febrile as to create a surface that virtually glitters, evoking a ghastly beauty in tension with the often intensely repellent subject being depicted. Some of this character of relentless scrutinizing of intricate surface detail lingers in the color images, particularly in the photographs of textiles in stacks or bales. These images echo the cadavers or close-up studies of living *flesh*, in their evocation of transcendence in decay. But somehow Liebling in turning to color has found a way out of his tendency slightly to moralize or to comment "coercively." He appears in recent work not to need subterfuge in aggression or in overt theater; paradoxically, the decision to employ color for him might actually be said to represent a cleansing, an act of simplification. Color seems to be a way of admitting his nature as an artist rather than a teacher or philosopher. For Liebling, the embracing of color photography seems to signify a kind of release from conscience into consciousness, a synthetic reengagement of his medium.

There is in much of the new work a sense of backing off from the message-giving nature of the camera, a suddenly lighter tone. Moreover, in the recent color photographs Liebling seems to range more widely both in terms of geographic location and compositional devices. We could scarcely find more diversity in composition and tonality than we see in the photographs reproduced here, and there is an even greater range in the larger group of color images from which these are selected. Liebling's command of still life is masterful; and in the textile mill photographs we are reminded of the perfectly surefooted mastery of a great constructivist artist. The interior or street scenes are less surprising because more closely related to earlier work. But the astonishing strength and originality, coexisting with a character of almost sweet lyricism, of the orchard landscape—this photograph in particular is a giveaway to the new attainment of ease and complexity in the recent work. Liebling, like Helen Levitt, makes many better-known color photographers pale by comparison.

One doesn't want to claim that these recent color photographs finally supersede the earlier work—this is not true. But through them we are able to reassess the earlier production, to see what makes some of the images specific to this artist, what really is motivating their composition and choice of subject. More and more we see that Liebling's humanity, his heritage and way of life, find literal expression in his work and communicate to us in the most immediate sense his own experience. The work is sometimes about guilt and expiation, sometimes about sheer desire, sometimes empathy. But these "contents" are not quite in the end the main point. The color work is really at its best a simple flirtation with esthetic excitement.

JANE LIVINGSTON

1. *Jerome Liebling: Photographs 1947–1977*, essay by Estelle Jussim, Untitled 15, Friends of Photography, Carmel, California, 1978.
2. Alan Trachtenberg, "Jerome Liebling Photographs," text accompanying Liebling portfolio, 1977.

No. 36. *Used Clothing Factory, New York City*

No. 31. *Interior, Amherst, Massachusetts*

No. 30. *Apple Orchard, Amherst, Massachusetts*

No. 32. *Weaving Factory Machines, Ware, Massachusetts*

No. 33. *Weaving Factory Machines, Ware, Massachusetts*

No. 39. *Brighton Beach, New York City*

No. 37. *Interior, Garment Factory, New York City*

No. 46. *Bus Repair Shop, East Jerusalem*

No. 52. *Men's Hat Shop, Jerusalem*

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

BLACK AND WHITE

The first 17 images are silver prints reproduced on 11 x 14 inch paper, the last ten the same on 16 x 20 inch paper.

1-5. from *Stockyards, South St. Paul, Minnesota* series, 1962

6-9. from *Malaga, Spain* series, 1966-67

from *Politics* series

10. *Humphrey/McCarthy*, 1957
11. *President Kennedy*, 1963
12. *George Wallace*, 1968
13. *George McGovern*, 1972

14-17. from *Cadaver* series, New York City, 1973

18-27. from *Handball* series, Miami Beach, 1974-79

COLOR

The following are EK74 prints reproduced on 16 x 24 inch paper. The first three images were made in 1978, the last two in 1980, and the remainder in 1979.

28. *House Interior, Amherst, Massachusetts*
29. *Dining Room Table, Amherst, Massachusetts*
30. *Apple Orchard, Amherst, Massachusetts*
31. *Interior, Amherst, Massachusetts*
32. *Weaving Factory Machines, Ware, Massachusetts*
33. *Weaving Factory Machines, Ware, Massachusetts*
34. *Woman in Weaving Factory, Ware, Massachusetts*
35. *Used Clothing Factory, New York City*
36. *Used Clothing Factory, New York City*
37. *Interior, Garment Factory, New York City*
38. *Interior, Garment Factory, New York City*
39. *Brighton Beach, New York City*
40. *Brighton Beach, New York City*
41. *Woman, Brighton Beach, New York City*
42. *Woman in Fur Jacket, Brighton Beach, New York City*
43. *Men in Front of OTB Office, Brighton Beach, New York City*
44. *Butcher Shop, East Jerusalem*
45. *Family, East Jerusalem*
46. *Bus Repair Shop, East Jerusalem*
47. *Boy, East Jerusalem*
48. *Shop Keeper, East Jerusalem*
49. *Candy Seller, East Jerusalem*
50. *Butcher Shop, East Jerusalem*
51. *Butcher Shop, East Jerusalem*
52. *Men's Hat Shop, Jerusalem*
53. *Woman and Green Door, Jerusalem*
54. *Man Smoking in Doorway, Jerusalem*
55. *Market, Beershiva, Israel*
56. *Camp Taconic, Hinsdale, Massachusetts*
57. *Saturday Dance, Louisiana*
58. *Migrant Worker, Apples, Amherst, Massachusetts*
59. *Camp Taconic, Hinsdale, Massachusetts*

JEROME LIEBLING

Born New York City, 1924.

Served U. S. Army, 1942-45.

Attended Brooklyn College, 1946-48; studied film production, New School for Social Research, New York City, 1948-49.

Became executive officer Photo League, 1947.

Taught University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1949-69; University of New York at New Platz, 1957-58; Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1976-77. Professor of Film and Photography, Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1970 to present.

Founding member of the Society for Photographic Education.

Films include *A Tree Is Dead*, 1956; *Pow-Wow*, 1960; *The Old Men*, 1965; *89 Years*, 1976.

Selected individual exhibitions Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1950; George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1957; Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1958, 1963; Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1963; Hampshire College, 1972; Union College, Schenectady, New York, 1975; Vision Gallery, Boston, 1977; Friends of Photography, Carmel, California, 1978; University of California Art Museum, San Diego, California, 1978; Portland Art School, Portland, Maine, 1979; University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1979.

Shown in numerous group exhibitions including "Photographs from the Collection of Sam Wagstaff," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., 1978 (traveling exhibition); "Mirrors and Windows," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1978 (traveling exhibition).

Publications include *Aperture*, No. 3, 1956 (article by the artist); *100 Years of Minnesota Architecture*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1958 (50 photographs); *Contemporary Photography*, Summer 1963 (article and portfolio); *The Face of Minneapolis*, Dillon Press, Minneapolis, 1966 (150 photographs); *Documentary Photography*, Time-Life Books, New York, 1972 (article and portfolio); *Aperture*, #79, 1977 (portfolio); *Faces: A Narrative History of the Portrait in Photography* by Ben Maddow, New York Graphic Society, Boston, Massachusetts, 1977; *A Book of Photographs from the Collection of Sam Wagstaff*, Gray Press, New York City, 1978; *Mirrors and Windows* by John Szarkowski, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1978; *Art of the State, Massachusetts Photographs 1975-1977*, Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation, Boston, Massachusetts, 1978 (portfolio); *Jerome Liebling: Photographs 1947-1977*, Friends of Photography, Carmel, California, 1978 (monograph); Editor, *The Massachusetts Review: Photography*, Winter 1978, Amherst, Massachusetts (hard cover edition titled *Photography: Current Perspectives* published by Light Impressions Corp., Rochester, New York, 1978).

Received National Endowment for the Arts Photography Fellowship, 1972, 1979; Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation Fellowship, 1975; John Simon Guggenheim Photography Fellowship, 1976; several awards for films.

Lives Amherst, Massachusetts.

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